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Venezuela

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order; other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation during the reporting period. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and a population of 28.4 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic and the remaining 8 percent Protestant, a member of another religion, or atheist. However, the Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimated that evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 10 percent of the population.

There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area. The Jewish community numbers approximately 9,500 and is centered in Caracas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order; other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, with the additional provision that the group serves the community's social interests.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. The government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that helped the poor, although there were cases where the subsidies were reduced or not disbursed in some states. The government continued to approve funding for the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) at reduced levels, but did not disburse funds during the reporting period. Other religious groups were free to establish their own schools. There were reports of government funding for certain evangelical groups, mainly for social projects implemented via government programs.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Christmas.

Foreign missionaries require special visas. Some missionaries expressed concern about refusal rates for first-time religious visas and, less frequently, renewals. Some missionary groups also complained that the religious visa process was prone to delay.

On August 13, 2009, the national assembly passed an education law that could prohibit religious education during normal school hours, including in private schools. There were no reports of implementation of this prohibition during the reporting period.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation during the reporting period. The constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or to interfere with the rights of others. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

During the reporting period, the CEV noted criticism from government-sponsored media intended to discredit CEV leadership. On April 20, 2010, Catholic Church leaders issued a pastoral letter that stated that the government had "totalitarian intentions" and criticized government "waste, corruption, and inefficiency." The following week, government newspaper *Diario Vea* called the church the "vanguard" of the counterrevolution and compared Cardinal Urosa, archbishop of Caracas, to the 19th century church that "like him, seated on the thrones of privilege and riches, opposed independence."

On June 2, 2010, following the Gaza flotilla incident, President Chávez called Israel a "genocidal state" but said he was not an "enemy of the Jews," that Venezuelan Jews "have our affection and our respect," and that he "could not believe that a Venezuelan Jew...would support this kind of massacre."

In January 2009, 11 persons, including several police officers, allegedly vandalized the Tiferet Israel synagogue. The suspects remained in prison, awaiting trial, at the end of the reporting period.

The government continued to prohibit Venezuelan or foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Like other private sector and nongovernmental entities, the CEV and evangelical communities were subjected to property expropriations. On February 7, 2010, during a television broadcast from a historic downtown Caracas plaza, President Chávez pointed to surrounding office buildings and ordered the government to expropriate them, which it did. Three were owned by the CEV and used as rental properties. Squatters occupied a Catholic church under construction in the state of Merida and a CEV property in the state of Barinas. The incidents were reported, but the government took no action to remove the illegal occupiers.

During the reporting period, evangelical leaders reported four seizures of church-owned land by squatters or members of government-sponsored Community Councils in the states of Lara, Bolivar, Aragua, and Anzoátegui. Each incident was reported to local authorities; however, there was no response by the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Jewish leaders reported that much of the anti-Semitic graffiti that appeared in 2009 remained visible during the reporting period. In February 2010 vandals spray-painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the CEV's downtown Caracas commercial buildings during the week after their expropriation by President Chávez because they were erroneously rumored to be Jewish-owned.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights; however, embassy representatives had only limited access to government officials. Embassy officials maintained close contact with most religious communities. The U.S. ambassador regularly met with religious authorities.

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